

Conditional Forms - Typical difficulties for learners

Comprehension:

Reading: Ss usually generally don't have problems of understanding, although they may still be misled by sentences which don't include *if* or one of the obvious conditional conjunctions such as *as long as* or *supposing*.

Listening: conditional sentences pose much more of a problem. In many languages conditional meaning is signalled by adverbs in the conditional clause or by an expression added to the end of the conditional clauses. There may also be very strict rules about the order of clauses. Learners who speak one of these languages (e.g. Chinese) may have difficulty in recognizing conditional sentences, particularly in order of clauses doesn't match the order of their first language.

Also, *if* and auxiliary verbs which establish the time reference of the sentences (e.g. *would*; *would have*) are frequently pronounced so indistinctly that learners may fail to pick them out.

Learners may also be misled by the use of past tenses to refer to present time, and may understand that phrases like *if I spoke Russian...* refer to the past.

When giving advice, speakers sometimes leave out the *if* clause. Learners are sometimes confused by this use.

A: *I slept badly again last night.*

B: *I'd make an appointment to see the doctor.*

Learners sometimes understand (wrongly) that sentences that begin *Were he here...* or *Had I known...* are questions. They may fail to recognize that sentences like these are conditionals.

Learners sometime confuse *if only* with *only if*.

Speaking and writing

Simplifying the grammar: For many learners, the auxiliary verbs used in constructing conditional sentences (e.g. *If he had seen anything he would have reported it*) have no rationale; they are just a string of words or syllables.

Under the pressure of communicating, some or all of these auxiliaries may be left out.

* *If you not tell me the news, I not try to contact anyone.*

(The learner wanted to say *If you hadn't told me about the news, I wouldn't have tried to contact anyone.*)

People who haven't learned conditional forms and are 'guessing the grammar' sometimes produce similar sentences.

'Regularising' the tense structure: Learners often use future tenses to refer to the future, and past tenses to refer to the past in conditional sentences. The following examples were spoken by advanced students:

* *It it'll rain tomorrow we're not going to set up the exhibition outside.*

* *We'd be a lot happier now if we didn't make such a bad investment last year.*

Native speakers also occasionally produce sentences like this.

Over-using *would*: Some learners become so concerned not to forget *would* that they may use it inappropriately in the *if* clause as well as in the conditional clause. Some learners (e.g. speakers of German) may also be influenced by their first language.

* *I could help you if my arm wouldn't be broken.*

Choosing the wrong conjunction: Learners sometimes use *when* or *in case* instead of *if*. Sometimes they may be influenced by their first language. For example, speakers of German sometimes use *when* when they mean *if*, and speakers of Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish sometimes use *in case*.

* *Let's stay at home in case it rains.*

* *Don't worry in case you hear a noise during the night.*

In cases like this, people often don't spot the mistake, and they understand something different from what the speaker intended.

Leaving conjunctions out: Often influenced by the grammar of their first language, some learners rely on context alone to make the conditional relationship between clauses clear. They may also rely on adverbs such as *then*.

* *I like someone> I give them a present when I visit them.*

(If I like someone, I give them a present when...)

* *Sorry, I listened to you then I didn't take the wrong road.*
(...If I had listened to you I wouldn't have...)

* *If you come any nearer I'll then scream.*
(If you come any nearer, I'll scream.)

Avoidance: It is very common for learners to find ways of expressing themselves which enable them not to use language they find 'difficult'. Often, the conditional Type 3 is particularly daunting, and learners may consciously or unconsciously avoid it.

(*) *I didn't see him so I didn't run away.*
(If I'd seen him, I'd have run away.)

It is easy for us to miss the fact that even very advanced learners regularly avoid using this conditional. Even if learners don't actually make mistakes, we may need to provide structured opportunities for them to practise the forms of conditional sentences.

Source: adapted from PARROTT, M. (2005) *Grammar for English Language Teachers*. CUP